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The Annihilation of History in D.H. Lawrence's Later Works

Stefania Michelucci

Capsized Classes in Lawrence's Life

- 1 In spite of his humble social background, Lawrence had the opportunity to meet several aristocrats in the course of his life. During his upbringing, just as Paul in *Sons and Lovers*, he was tossed between the world of his father, who, as a miner, was in the most literal sense a man of the earth and that of his sterner mother who had bourgeois aspirations. Lawrence's very inability to reconcile these two figures and, as a consequence, his need to reject both, is confirmed by his attraction to a socially atypical woman, Frieda von Richthofen, who helped him in his emancipation from the prison of puritan values and the narrow-mindedness of provincial Midlands. Frieda belonged to an aristocratic Prussian Family, quite emancipated both in ideas (as shown by her friendship with Otto Gross, a Freudian disciple and a supporter of free sex) and in practice (all the von Richthofen sisters had many love affairs). Frieda's parents were strongly opposed,¹ as is Emma Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, to their daughter's marriage with a writer of working-class origin and with no money in his pocket. Yet Frieda became Lawrence's lifetime companion. In spite of her sexual unfaithfulness,² she proved to be a real mate who greatly helped him achieve his regeneration as a man and his growth as a writer. During their journeys around the world, they came in touch with several aristocrats, as is mentioned in many biographies on the writer (see John Worthen, Mark Kinkead-Weekes, David Ellis, Michael Squires, etc). Among them, there was Lady Ottoline Morrell, parodied as Hermione in *Women in Love*, as well as the Sitwells living in Tuscany, in Montegufoni Castle.³ After visiting the castle Lawrence criticised the empty eccentricity of the aristocrat Sir George Sitwell, and especially his strange collection of beds: "those four-poster golden Venetian monsters that look like Mexican high altars" (*Letters* v, 474)⁴; he also went to see the Sitwells' English country house in Derbyshire, which became one of the models for Wragby Hall in *Women in Love*. The many traditional aristocrats who are portrayed in Lawrence's works often have negative effects on the *Bildung* and evolution of

other characters. Suffice it to think, for instance, of the deadening influence of the Marchesa in Aaron's Rod.⁵

Natural aristocrats?

- 2 In the 1920s Lawrence developed a rather nebulous idea of natural aristocrats – as opposed to landed, pedigreed and wealthy aristocrats – who would become the leaders of a regeneration of Western Civilization. This is the case of many characters in Lawrence's "leadership novels," from Count Dyonis Psanek in *The Ladybird*, to Don Ramon in *The Plumed Serpent*, to Somers in *Kangaroo*, to mention just a few of them. Although undeniably attractive, these figures seem to lack something and their vague idea of leadership, their abstract preaching for the regeneration of humanity out of the ashes of modern western civilisation is never really credible, thus causing the works in which they figure also to appear unconvincing. They are destined to experience failure as was the case for Lawrence's Utopian project Ranim, an isle of the Blessed here on earth, a project he considered for a while but which had no followers.⁶
- 3 Mellors, in a way, is a different kind of figure, just as *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is different from the leadership novels and stories Lawrence wrote in the 1920s. Mellors reflects Lawrence's new awareness of the impracticability of his idea of a palingenesis of mankind and his consequent turning to the idea of a private, inner regeneration, which might shake off the deadening heritage of Puritanism and the exclusive worship of the mind which, in the modern world, prevent the achievement of the fullness of life.
- 4 *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a *sui generis* novel, although the theme it deals with, female adultery, is found in many famous 19th century novels, from *The Scarlet Letter* to *Emma Bovary*, from *Anna Karenina* to *Effi Briest*, to mention just a few of them. It does not really belong to this tradition because of its very setting, Old Rural England (that is at least what Clifford sees while thinking to the aristocratic family "seat": "Clifford loved the wood. He wanted this place inviolate, shut off from the world," LCL 42), and of its opposing the charm of the countryside to the mechanized and disorienting metropolis, the beauty of Nature to the ugliness of coal mines – an ugliness that Connie sees as a circle of Hell in Dante's *Comedy*. The Manor she lives in is, in a different way, a hell from which she finds a shelter in a secluded place, in nature, outside history and modernity. "The wood was almost a sanctuary, a sacred place outside history, yet she still had no connection with it. There was the silence and the real aristocratic trees."
- 5 Oliver Mellors, Lawrence's natural aristocrat in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, has not always been a gamekeeper; in the past, he had joined the army ("Then came the war and I joined up," LCL 202). Mellors had become a lieutenant, as many men from the working-class inevitably had (given the decimation of their social superiors in battle), but after the war he had totally renounced any aspiration to refinement.⁷ Yet he is "quite uncommon," as Connie notices when she meets him; he is still a cultured man who speaks both a refined language and dialect, a man who has rejected the degeneration of modernity, the rapacity of the age and its spreading violence. Although in the final letter he sounds like a deeply unhappy and depressed man, he seems at peace with himself in a timeless space, the wood and his hut, the game he is looking after, as the inhabitant of a natural order which appears to be unchanged. In this place, he discovers the language of tenderness when Constance's tears while touching the little pheasant arouse in him a sense of protection

towards the suffering lady and this marks the beginning of their relationship. Through touch and through their body language, rejecting their cultural inherited inhibitions and shames, they both achieve a regeneration which endows them with a new strength. They are now reborn in the body and have overcome the deadening power of the mind, "sex in the head" or vicious sexuality (like that of Mellors' first wife) with the result that they can now face the whole world and fight against it with the power of their relationship, as the old medieval knights used to fight and defend their values with the sword. Although at that moment they are far from fighting against society, or for it, Mellors plans to avoid it, in so far as he possibly can: his relationship with Connie is "the only thing in the world" (LCL 300) and he plans a future with her in defiance of all the rest of society. Mellors is a natural aristocrat because he is an unselfish paladin ready to defend Connie, the imprisoned princess, from the dragon which is devouring her, be it her paralysed husband, Sir Clifford, be it Michaelis with his mechanical sex, be it Hilda with her false morality, be it Duncan with his lifeless art.

- 6 In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence tries to revive the old values of medieval chivalry (mainly as far as disinterestedness and faithfulness to Nature and to the Self are concerned). He expresses his nostalgia for a life in touch with Nature and its vital energy; or to put it differently, he embodies in the novel his dream of a golden age almost at the dawn of the Universe. In the way he portrays Mellors and his life in the wood, he also betrays the influence of certain literary tendencies of the 19th century – the Pre-Raphaelite school, Ruskin and William Morris – who celebrated the past and above all the freedom and bodily creativity of craftsmanship in opposition to the ugliness of a mechanised world. This influence is also seen, for instance, in the episode in which Mellors makes cages with his own hands.⁸
- 7 Yet, in some respects, Lawrence is moving in a direction opposed to Ruskin and his school, because he is rejecting the Ruskinian celebration of verticality and spirituality (see the losing character of Will in *The Rainbow*) in favour of a horizontal kind of rebirth, the rebirth of the body. In *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Lawrence rejects the Ruskinian image of the woman as the angel of the house, a stereotype Clifford would like to revive, with Connie sitting near him, silently embroidering and devoutly listening to the men's conversation without taking part in it, reduced to a pretty piece of furniture deprived of any real identity. "Yet, she sat there! She had to sit mum. She had to be quiet as a mouse, not to interfere with the immensely important speculations of these highly-mental gentlemen. But she had to be there!" (LCL 35).
- 8 *Lady Chatterley's Lover* does not really fit in with any narrative genre or sub-genre. It is not a novel of talk or a novel of adultery (though it includes both models), or only an erotic, scandalous novel (the Bible of the Sixties' generation); it comes close (like all the late novels written by Lawrence), to the ideological novel, in its raising such issues as the role of the aristocracy in the modern world and, above all, that of the woman. Yet, more than that, in my opinion, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a Utopian novel which points to a possible way out of the ashes of post-war Europe and finds it in a return to the ancestral values of pure, disinterested aristocracy – values that, in the novel revive in a sheltered place in nature, isolated from the spreading Inferno of the surrounding world. Yet this isolation is rather an illusion (they can hear the noise of the pits, they can see their lights at night). The lovers are longing to be together but they are still apart at the end of the novel: "But a great deal of us is together, and we can but abide by it, and steer our courses to meet

soon. John Thomas says good-night to lady Jane, a little droopingly, but with a hopeful heart." (302).

- 9 As Lawrence writes at the beginning of the novel: "we've got to live, no matter how many skies have fallen" (*LCL* 5). But how to live is something that is still to be found out: *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, written when the writer was so close to his death, is a message of hope, an attempt to find a light in the tunnel by way of the creation of a new language able to interpret Nature without destroying it, to discover its mysteries and secrets (as in ancient rites), a language, which, like the mots en liberté of the Futurists (to which Lawrence owes a lot) can infuse into life and into words a new womanly tender virility.

NOTES

1. Baroness von Richthofen was broad-minded. On the contrary, Frieda's father was utterly old fashioned and narrow-minded.
2. I would like to mention Martha Crotch's story about Frieda who almost missed D.H. Lawrence's death because of her desire to be with Angie (Angelo Ravagli).
3. The character of Lady Eva in *The First Lady Chatterley* is based on Lady Ida Sitwell. See David Ellis, *D.H. Lawrence: Dying Game 1922-1930*, 341.
4. On that visit, see David Ellis, *D.H. Lawrence. Dying Game: 1922-1930*, CUP, Cambridge 1998.
5. See Stefania Michelucci, "Sexuality's Mortal Trap: Sex and Contamination in Aaron's Rod," *Études Lawrenciennes* 2004.
6. Cfr. "Episode at Café Royal" 1924, when Lawrence invites all his friends to follow him in New Mexico to found a community for some happy few, but only Dorothy Brett accepts and accompanies him and Frieda in March. On Rananim see Stefania Michelucci, "A Man Who Loved Islands: D.H. Lawrence and the Paradox of Rananim", in *Vite di Utopia*, edited by Vita Fortunati and Paola Spinozzi, Longo Editore, Ravenna 2000, 311-319 and by the same author, "D.H. Lawrence's (Un)happy Islands, *Études Lawrenciennes* 46 (2015).
7. Mellors was far more likely to have been wounded, like Clifford, and to have fallen a few rungs down the social ladder, as an unemployable man after the War.
8. This scene is central in Lawrence's novel, it changes from version to version. See Serena Cenni and Sandro Melani, "Lawrence on Screen: filmare uno scandalo, in Cenni e Ceramella (eds), *D.H. Lawrence, Firenze e la sfida di Lady Chatterley*, Firenze, Edizioni dell'Assemblea 2010, 125-140.

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